

Choral Evensong Address 22.2.26

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Luke 15:1-10

We heard two Bible passages that may well be very familiar to many of us. The thing is, though, that even very familiar scriptures can suddenly take on a new significance in the light of the circumstances we find ourselves in at a particular time. I recall a rabbi here in this Cathedral years ago saying that the scripture *becomes* the word of God as you read it.

The standout message of the Deuteronomy reading is this: keep remembering. Use every opportunity to remind yourself, and especially the next generation, why you live the way you do, why you “*keep the commandments*”, as it is styled here. And that matters.

We know there are people who say “I don’t need to go to church to be a Christian”. There’s a grain of truth in that, but the whole point of “going to church”, whatever form that takes, is that it’s the means by which we all collectively remind ourselves. All that occurs as we meet together: the liturgy, the scripture readings, the hymns and choral anthems - not forgetting sermons, of course! – all these elements are the means by which we remind ourselves why we live the way we do. And in our case, of course, it’s all about Jesus.

The ancient Israelites were commanded to “*keep these words...recite them... talk about them...write them*”. But it wasn’t just to do with remembering words. “*Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord.*” Now here is the link, as I see it, with what is going on in our world right now. We are witnessing the rise of what has been called “Christian nationalism”. It’s blindingly obvious in the US, but we can see it manifested in other parts of the world – Russia comes to mind – and there is an element of it even here in the UK.

Whenever Christians, in any time and place, ally themselves with the secular power of the day there is a price to pay. It’s fascinating and heartening to observe, by means of the internet, social media etc. that there are those, both Christians and others, who are speaking up like the OT prophets of old and protesting that “Christian nationalism” is a travesty of the way of Christ. Time and again, people quote the prophet Micah: *what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6.8*

The ancient Israelites were to keep reminding themselves that God acted to set them free from a life of slavery in Egypt. We meet as Church to keep reminding ourselves that Christ has set us free from the mind-set associated with the power-seekers and money-worshippers of this world. And it isn’t just a matter of words and beliefs. “*Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord.*”

Our reading from Luke’s gospel points up the contrast between the worldly powers and the way of Christ. The nationalism we see today seeks to exclude, to rigidly define who is in and who is out, who belongs to the tribe and who doesn’t. In contrast to that, here we see Jesus deliberately seeking out those who don’t belong, the social undesirables. “*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” Shall we bring that up to date? “*This fellow welcomes immigrants and asylum seekers and eats with them.*”

That's exactly the contrast that present-day commentators and prophets are highlighting! Now Jesus doesn't make a great speech to defend himself. In typical fashion, he tells a parable, a little story, about something lost and retrieved – three little stories in this case: he saves the best until last, the one that comes just after today's reading finishes: the story of the lost son and the loving father who couldn't wait to welcome him back.

The scribes and Pharisees in this gospel incident are the equivalent of the Christian, and other, nationalists whose default mind-set is to exclude those who are seen as not fitting in. Of course, political decisions have to be made about immigration, as about anything else, but here we are thinking about attitudes and how they are manifested in words and actions.

So today in the US, for example, some are querying how people can call themselves Christian but support the brutalities of ICE. Now they may say they don't support such brutalities, but they do give their blessing, as it were, to a régime that enables and encourages such behaviour. The reason for supporting such a régime seems to be that such an alliance gives them power and opportunity to impose their version of Christian values on the whole population.

That kind of triumphalism is the polar opposite of the way of the one who "emptied himself", the one who washed feet and told his followers to do the same, the one who said "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." There's a link with our Deuteronomy reading. The Israelites then were told to keep remembering and passing on the memory. Every time we share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion should be a reminder that we do not follow the ways of the world, but the Jesus way of giving, serving and welcoming.

It's a hopeful sign that many churches, many followers of Christ, are acting out that difference: they are demonstrating love by supporting and caring for those who are victims of oppression, going out of their way to act as witnesses to injustice, and speaking up for the powerless and victimised. And it's not just Christians who are showing the love of God in practical ways like that. Jesus also told the wonderful and inspiring parable of the Good Samaritan, the story of another outsider who went out of his way to help a victim of highway robbery. The term "Good Samaritan" has passed into the language, a reminder of course that not all Good Samaritans come from Samaria! And we all know the punchline at the end of that particular story: "*Go and do likewise.*"

